

## Interview - Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUL 26 2018

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam is Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies at SOAS, University of London and Fellow of Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge. Educated at the University of Hamburg, American University (Washington DC) and Cambridge, where he received his MPhil and PhD as a multiple scholarship student. Prof. Adib-Moghaddam was the first Jarvis Doctorow Fellow in International Relations and Peace Studies at St. Edmund Hall and the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford. He is co-editor in chief, together with Prof. Ali Mirsepassi (New York University), of the Cambridge book series, The Global Middle East. He is the author of several books, including *On the Arab revolts and the Iranian revolution and Psycho-nationalism*. In addition, he has published over 50 research articles in scientific journals and books and he has given numerous keynote lectures all over the world including in Japan, Qatar, Armenia, the United States, Iran, Germany and the UK. More recently, Adib-Moghaddam has started to research the impact of artificial intelligence on human security. He tweets at @Adib\_Moghaddam.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

The most progressive and cutting edge advances are being made beyond disciplines. An emergent caste of critical scholars is blurring the lines between artificial boundaries in a very innovative and refreshing way. In some of the fields that I have engaged with: International Relations, Middle Eastern Studies, Psychology, and Philosophy, new movements are emerging that appreciate the complexity of our social world which can only be achieved with an appreciation of different methods and research designs drawn from the wide range of the contemporary social sciences. My new field of research, artificial intelligence (AI) and human security, is a case in point: trying to understand the ethics and dangers of AI for us humans requires even venturing into the so-called “hard sciences”. These trends are the reason why I created the Professorship in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies at SOAS. It denotes, to my mind, the transdisciplinary and global approach that is emerging out of the recent movements in transnational scholarship. At least this is my impression at the moment.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

Change is inevitable and scholarship needs to be continuously renewed in order to contribute to an understanding of our troubled world. We are living through incredibly dangerous and tumultuous times and I continue to believe that good scholarship carries a culture of peace and tolerance with it. I have only just started to write with a firm understanding of the complexity of the world and my role as a writer or intellectual within it. My first books were mission statements – if anything. They were written at a time when I was an inexperienced “kid scholar” who was advised to publish or perish by many of his peers. Hence my brushstrokes were heavy and at times convoluted. Academia can be a merciless and intimidating trade and at that point of my career I almost felt coerced to produce something. My very young age didn't help, so in the end, I closed my eyes, wielded the pen and published.

There is then this inner urge to continuously improve – to study the world deeper, not only in books, but in real life. Indeed, the latter aspect – real life experience – is getting more and more important to my work, as I have somewhat escaped the institutional dictates and the political economy of the publishing world. I write more freely and a lot of that has to do with the fact that I have pursued an approach to my research that synthesises – as much as possible – my

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life experiences beyond the Ivory Tower with training of at the Universities of Hamburg, American (DC), Oxford, SOAS and of course Cambridge. With the opportunity of living and thinking beyond cultures, came the realisation that the world has to be seen as one place if we are to understand the past, present and future of humanity. One can only do that – in my opinion – if one attempts to live and think beyond some of the rather more debilitating societal rules, cultural boundaries and political confines. Here is a tiny little space to venture to where thinking freely seems possible. I am in the process of widening this space for me and my associates and to explore the liberties therein.

**Your latest book is titled *Psycho-nationalism. Global Thought, Iranian Imaginations*. What do you mean by psycho-nationalism?**

Psycho-nationalism is about a dangerous transmission belt. It traces the way politics manipulates our genuine feelings for the nefarious purpose of worshipping the nation, killing and dying for it. As opposed to traditional nationalism studies, psycho-nationalism focuses on the cognitive effects of this form of mental abuse. So psycho-nationalism really presents a psychology of the way the idea of the nation is continuously invented and introjected into our thinking as something worth killing and dying for. The book starts with the sentence “The nation is a love story”. But this is the way we are made to think. It is not a natural, innate human desire to enter this one-sided, abusive relationship. Psycho-nationalists act as narcissistic bullies who push and shove their objects into submission for the pure reason of power.

In fact, in Europe the nation as an idea to die for was invented in the laboratories of the enlightenment and the book traces this ideological history. In Persia, the idea of a coherent nation was institutionalised in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Safavid Dynasty. As in any other country – for instance in the way Native Americans were annihilated in America – the birth of the so-called nation was rather arbitrary, violent and full of myths about natural origins and roots.

So the book writes a history of the way, the idea of a nation dominates us with such vehement force until today. In Europe, there is a resurgence of the right-wing exactly because of this siren song of psycho-nationalism and the subliminal consciousness of societies that are susceptible to it despite of the terror of fascism in the past and the present. In the United States, the Trump administration has officialised bigotry against minorities in the name of “making America great again”. In Britain, a narrow-minded opportunist such as Nigel Farage managed to hijack the country into voting for Brexit, in the name of a false notion of national purity and/or sovereignty. And then there is Eastern Europe where authoritarian movements such as Victor Orban are targeting “the other” under the wings of successfully marketed right-wing parties. Italy has moved to the right as well and there are many more examples all around the world. Psycho-nationalism, then, is alive and well exactly because this psychology to create boundaries between us and them has been cognitively anchored in our minds for a long time now.

**You argue that psycho-nationalism is one of the most potent forces of our times. Does it explain the success of post-liberal right movements such as those supporting Donald Trump in the US?**

In the book, there are several references to the resurgent right-wing movements all over the world. Donald Trump is the epitome of our sad predicament. While there exists an increasingly global consciousness aided by transnational networks, there is an equally potent movement in the opposite, darker direction. One can smell the satanic stench of sulphite whenever some of these “white supremacists” rear their ugly head. We thought after the Hitlers and Mussolinis of this world, notions of blood, purity, and race would be marginalised. But here we are with a president in the United States whose discriminatory language has officialised a new form of racism. Fortunately, there exist many forms of resistance, but there is no doubt in my mind that psycho-nationalism is a real threat to peaceful co-existence in contemporary societies.

**In your book you apply the notion of psycho-nationalism to the understanding of Iranian history. Why do you think psycho-nationalism was important for the Iranian revolution?**

The Iranian revolution was a hybrid phenomenon. The revolutionaries were not nationalists in the traditional sense of the term. In fact, the leader of the Iranian revolution Ayatollah Khomeini was against the forms of Persian nationalism espoused by the ancient regime. And yet, the Iranian state, as it was institutionalised after the revolution couldn't fully

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escape the legacies of psycho-nationalism in the country. The political formula for power remained similar. There was a clear boundary between the sanctioned ideology of the state and those placed outside of it. The state adopted a sacrosanct hegemonic position that demanded the sacrifice of the populace for the sake of the nation, codified in terms of the “oppressed”, the umma or Iranians more specifically. Of course, the tropes and metaphors changed from the Shah’s orthodox Persian nationalism and they took a rather more potent religious, theocratic and explicitly transcendental colouring after the revolution. But this emphasis on the nation as a sacred project continued and the state remained the sanctioned ideal that everyone should be cognitively obliged to. This is psycho-nationalism par excellence. Yet at the same time there is a nuance and difference to the situation in Europe and North America. In Iran, psycho-nationalism is not imbued with a systematic grammar of racism. This genealogical and biological emphasis on difference that was developed in the laboratories of the European enlightenment, never really turned into a systematic movement in Persia, not least because Muslim political thought and philosophy is – at its ideational epicentre – anti-racist.

### **What is your understanding of the current relations between Iran and the USA?**

Iran and the United States are at loggerheads again and I have spent a lot of time talking about this dynamic in other venues, including for the Tehran Times in Iran. But there is one slight nuance I would like to express here. After the breach of the JCPOA by the Trump administration, Iran has gained a lot of diplomatic capital. There will be economic consequences of course. But ironically this uneducated move by the least intelligent President in US history, reconfirmed the Iranian narrative that it has been treated abominably by the United States, simply because after the revolution of 1979 it stopped being a vassal state, dependent on US dictates. There is some truth to this. Iran is punished because it says no and because the state pursues its interests in accordance with a strict independence dictum that evolved out of the revolution.

### **You address Iranian history from a global and comparative perspective. In what sense can the history of Iranian nationalism, and of nationalism in general, be seen as global?**

The book, and more generally The Global Middle East book series that I co-edit for Cambridge University Press, approach local dynamics from a global and comparative perspective exactly because global history has always been connected. It is just that in the theft of the history, one of the crimes that happened during the European enlightenment, the historical archives of humanity were cleansed from any impingement from other cultures. Suddenly, world history became largely European history, International Relations became and American Social Science, Philosophy was the prerogative of the West etc.

Today, there exists a Reconquista of the orphaned stories and histories that make up our common human experience. Nationalism is no exception. We are taught that nationalism as we know it evolved in Europe out of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 which ended the devastating religious wars on the continent. But the book explains how in Iran, one of the few historic nations in the world, nationalism, the idea of Persia, was institutionalised in a very modern way already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Safavid dynasty. Notions of Iranian-ness with ethnic, linguistic and ideological signifiers existed since the Persian empires of antiquity, but it was the Safavid dynasty in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that perfected the art of psycho-nationalism with all its trimmings. Understanding nationalism and politics in general can never be complete without an understanding of the most ancient entities in human history. Iran is one of them and the country is as much a product of global dynamics as it has fed into them. These connections are essential for a better empirical footing of today’s social sciences.

### **Your book is animated by a strong political passion, one that could be shared by some of the Italian nationalist writers you mention at the beginning of the book. What is the role of intellectuals and political thinkers in our times?**

Politics is everywhere. It penetrates our daily existence. One of the reasons why I have studied political phenomena is exactly because there is nothing as penetrative as politics. It is just that many people are not aware of how intrusive the state really is. Now my passion may be political in the sense that I am hyper-curious about the way politics manipulates our daily reality and life. I am sure many nationalists that I discuss in the book, including for

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instance Renan, Fichte and Mazzini, had a similar motivation. But in some of their writings I found a rather explicit proclivity towards politico-ideological idealisation of the nation-state, not least because of the vicissitudes of their time. Intellectuals today can't afford to be co-opted by any political cause or movement. They have to hover, as much as possible, beyond partisan controversy, and ideological leanings to the Left or to the Right.

There needs to be a global caste of thinkers that are united in their cause for relative freedom and relative world peace without hysterical calls for arms. To that end, engagement with the state is necessary and one shouldn't shirk that responsibility out of ideological aversions to any kind of political system. After all it is the political class that is in need of education about the world of politics. If a concerned intellectual doesn't go to the meetings, a right-wing think tank activist will happily take his or her place and make the case for war. I have experienced this in my activism against a war with Iran. So far, we have succeeded to make the case against it. The overall responsibility then, is to be present as a critical locus for ideas in the relevant realms of society, the media, government, the educational sector etc. The overall aim is rooted in the same utopias that the good guys in human history have thrived for since the beginning of time: freedom and world peace within the possibilities that we have. Today, more than ever, we are in need of intellectual leadership to that end.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to emerging scholars of International Relations?**

Treat your scholarship as an art form that serves humanity as you are working in one of the most sensitive areas of the social sciences where matters of life and death, peace and war are decided. Approach your work as an artist, not a trade, not something that pays your mortgage or serves the interest of institutions whose agenda within your society is destructive. Retain the idealism in your political activism, and temper it with the scepticism of your critical mind. See the institution you work in, as a platform, but don't let it compromise your art. Let the institution learn from you and not the other way around. After all, your conscience is clear. Within this beautifully vivid *fata morgana* that you can keep alive for yourself, you will find the intense satisfaction that any artistic work promises. Once you venture out of it, you will find a bleak desert of nothingness.